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# Practicing Citizens: Adult Stories of Cocooning and Taking Flight

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**Abstract:** *This qualitative study concerns how a specific vehicle for social intervention programs impacts upon the civic behavior of targeted individuals. The crux of the problem is whether individuals can learn citizenship, and, if provided the skills and opportunities, will citizens utilize their knowledge to participate politically.*

## Background and Purpose

Over the last thirty years, social scientists have documented an increasing decline in the active participation of citizens of the United States in politics, government, and the affairs of their communities. They generalize democracy and citizenship have shifted further away from the notion of citizens sharing responsibility in governance and more toward the concept of citizens as rights bearing and the recipients of services (Sandel, 1996; Schachter, 1997). However, citizens have reported they would like to participate politically if they just knew how to penetrate the political process (Harwood, 1991; Stout, 1996).

Present trends of social policy require from citizens an active form of political participation. Comprehensive community-level programs have been developed for combating social problems (Kaftarian & Hansen, 1994; Lavrakas, 1995). Program facilitators have established neighborhood leadership institute training programs to promote the development of civic skills among individuals who come from different ethnic, lower-and middle-class income groups, and have had little community leadership experience (Boyte, 1989).

The Gwinnett Neighborhood Leadership Institute (GNLI) in the Atlanta metropolitan area provided participants with knowledge about community and county governments, opportunities to meet local officials, and the introduction to a range of services. The purpose of this research was to study the impact of GNLI training on the political participation of individuals, their perception of citizenship, and the nature of learning during training.

## Relevant Literature

Principal theoretical frameworks and perspectives include participatory democracy and political behavior theories, civil society, collaborative leadership and adult civic learning. Barber (1984) insists that a healthy democracy cannot be sustained without the participation of citizens. Pateman (1970) claims through active participation, citizens come to realize the difference between personal desires and the common good. Furthermore, participation is both educative and reiterative. Mansbridge (1995) acknowledges citizens who actively participate in democratic governance often feel the experience has changed them, and those who observe them often believe the experience has long-run effects on the citizens' character.

Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1995), assert that civic skills and psychological engagement combat negative effects of differences in socio-economic status. Rosenstone and Hanson (1993) define terms of political efficacy as both internal, the confidence to participate, and external, participants feeling their activities had some meaningful effect.

The concept of civil society (Putnam, 1995) maintains specific community environments must be in place for citizenship to flourish. Portney and Berry (1997) identify critical elements as the beliefs and types of political behavior that contribute to positive attitudes by residents about their neighborhood and encourage a willingness to work cooperatively on its behalf. Collaborative leadership principles (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Gastil, 1994, Stout, 1996) include broad-based involvement, commitment, action, peer problem-solving, acceptance of individual contributions, and the sustenance of hope.

Civic learning is interactive. Citizens are influenced by each other and in turn influence the environment (Sigel, 1989). Boggs (1991), Brookfield (1987b), Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks (1996), Freire (1970), and Jarvis (1992) contradict the rationale of the weakened and limited citizen and ad-

dress those structures and processes that promote the importance of civic learning for the development of competent and active citizens that comprise the public realm.

## Methodology

More often, a composite picture showing how groups of individuals meet or fail the normative perspective of the political participation of citizens is developed through quantitative data. Unfortunately, it is often collected from knee-jerk reactions to telephone surveys that use predetermined and closed interview questions.

Qualitative evaluation and research methodology was utilized in this study to provide an in-depth investigation into the perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes of individuals in a specific context (Patton, 1985). Fifteen participants from the GNLI training cycles, 1995-1996, 1996-1997, and 1997-1998, were purposefully selected for face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Selection criteria of ethnicity, age, gender, and experience reflected the program's efforts of recruiting participants. Data was analyzed using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Research questions included: (1) How has NLI training influenced participants' perceptions of themselves as citizens? (2) How has NLI training affected behaviors of participants regarding political participation? (3) How has NLI training affected attitudes of participants regarding political participation? (4) How has NLI training affected the nature of learning of participants regarding citizenship and political participation?

## Findings and Conclusions

One overarching conclusion gained from this study was to confirm that citizenship is an art that develops from adult learning and practice. The impact of GNLI training influenced the following areas: (1) a broadened perception of citizenship; (2) optimism for local government; (3) tolerance for the political process; (4) the development of significant behaviors regarding political participation; and (5) the nature of learning regarding political participation.

*Broadened and Active Perception of Citizenship*

Citizenship *before* GNLI training meant a passive relationship with government, concern for individual rights, and dependence on electing public leaders to represent their interests. The impact of training resulted in a more broadened and collectivist view of citizenship. One participant explained, "…being in GNLI, you focus on… community activities. At one time I never paid that much attention to community activities and being involved…everyone within a community as a whole. And, you know, you would actually see your neighbors!" Participants also, placed citizenship beyond their own neighborhoods: "Generally, you didn't stray outside your subdivision…then during and after the program…I found out I have an impact of a wider range beyond the subdivision and at the county level."

*Participant Attitudes toward Political Participation*

Essential to participants' belief they could make a difference in their community was what one participant pinned as "the courage and willingness" to participate. A participant related, "There are things that I can do, contacts that I made, that let me know, yeah, there is some valid reason to this madness…why I vote and still have some impact on more than just voting. You don't have to just sit back and say maybe next time we'll get somebody in that's better." Another citizen was amazed with his efforts in a neighborhood clean-up campaign: "It was surprising to me. You would explain to 'em where you're from, who you're with, and they would actually help sponsor it. You figured they'd turn you absolutely down!"

The belief that one could make a difference gave participants the courage to become a *practicing citizen.* Participants reported that the training helped them find voice. A participant confided previously that she did not have the courage to get up and speak in church: "I don't like to get up in front of people and speak, and I know I should be able to." Another participant used her newly found voice to aid her abused nephew. She claimed it helped her "go before the courts and talk to different people and help him [nephew] out." A naturalized citizen learned to overcome his fear of approaching the administration of various community services: "In the past, I would be really scared to approach somebody and say, Hey, I need help. Now I know if there is a need I feel I can go to county or go to other resources"

*Optimism toward Local Government*

Participants tended to be cynical about government

or politics as usual and were more optimistic in how they could collectively effect change at the local level. Participants reported they would be more likely to contact and work with officials as opposed to contacting a Congressman on the state or national level. One participant spoke to the power of grassroots efforts: "problems won't get changed by the political, it's going to get changed by individual morality, cultural issues, not by something that's by the government [federal].

*Tolerance*

Participants responded negatively toward the political and bureaucratic process and more positively toward individuals working within the process. Reservations were expressed as follows: "[I feel] confident and also unfortunate. There's a flipside. I need a pencil or probably three forms to do this or that just to get the pencil…but there were some folks trying to shake the tree and make things a little bit easier." Participants admitted a tendency to "blame people for what is not getting done." Becoming familiar with local officials and administrators during training, prompted participants to say, "I think it helped me to realize that regular people run our government."

Participants exhibited some tolerance toward the ambiguity of the process in which issues were not always resolved and citizens were not always satisfied: "We don't have all the answers. I think that some members [class participants] are better accepting of that than others. That's been the frustration of learning about government. Just knowing it's not easy to change things."

*Developed Political Behaviors*

Participants were afforded the opportunity to contact officials in local government and leaders in community activities providing them with a network of resources. They found they could give faces to what were previously known as a list of titles and job descriptions. A participant related her experiences in contacting local officials "they're not hard to reach but sometimes hard to communicate one-on-one. Got to get them out of the office…bring them down where they see and actively get them involved to see what I'm talking about."

Also, participants related the importance of contacting neighbors, "…when we first started out, we used fliers and then we would talk to people as we were putting out the fliers." The bottom line, according to another participant, was "I think so much of the people not being involved is not feeling connected. If they never get that connection, then nobody, then no friend calls them passionate about some issue and recruits them to do something."

*Navigating the political process.* Navigating meant knowing "what's out there" and how to access it. GNLI training gave them entrance to organizations. Participants said: "I didn't have an idea of what the resources are, the resources in education, health, and social services. I was working with the new immigrants and I had never accessed those resources," or, "these people actually have this kind of information all ready. We don't have to go and pick it up and make it up ourselves." Other participants noted that it was easier to participate if you "at least have an organization [GNLI] and use their name to say I represent or I am an alumni of…and I have an interest in whatever," and that making yourself available wasn't always easy because, "You can't just walk into the homeless shelter downtown and say I want to stay overnight. You have to be established and they have to have faith in ya."

Participants began to develop an insider's knowledge of the political process. One participant wryly explained his experience in attending council meetings, "We learned the process. Commissioners talk at you, this is just how it works. The other side is, oh my god, this *is* the way it works!" Another participant observed, "We spent a year in meetings talking about concepts. They have so much talent, but the board will never enact anything." Other participants came to discern real policy effects of skewed implementation, "They have a youth center, [but] it's for kids. I guess the oldest one there is probably 12…nothing for the teens and that's in the housing projects…so that's what I been lookin' at."

*Cocooning.* A relatively small number of these participants are actually participating in activities outside the GNLI. A few are serving on different community boards and one is serving as a member of local governing commission. More participate in GNLI organizational and training activities or they are participating in the community through the workplace. The intent of the training is understood by most of the participants as well as the knowledge that many had not yet extended themselves beyond the institute. One participant confirmed, "that GNLI

training is another step toward getting involved in the community." Another stated, "I feel like you've trained me to get beyond that so that I can go out and start my own project somewhere else with different groups of people." Still another explained that the GNLI mission is "to train leaders… not take all these leaders that you have just trained and keep them."

Thus, the most revealing aspect of this study was political participation must be learned and practiced in a safe environment. Natural history has shown us many winged insects go through a metamorphosis that effects the end result of unfolding their wings and taking flight. The metamorphosis from caterpillar to moth includes a stage where the larva spins a cocoon that provides shelter for a pupa (Farber, 1984). During this stage the pupa is mysteriously rearranged to form the body of a mature moth with folded wings. When it is ready, the moth emerges from its cocoon, unfolds its wings and takes flight into the world. Similarly, GNLI itself can be visualized as a cocoon sheltering its graduates so they can mature as they think about and practice citizenship in a safe environment. Practicing citizens in this stage involved themselves in aiding the program through administrative tasks, serving on an alumni board, or serving on GNLI committees. Hopefully, these participants practicing citizenship within the shelter of GNLI will gain enough confidence and motivation to emerge from the boundaries of the institute.

*Nature of learning.* A principal requirement of GNLI training was to participate in a group project that would improve the quality of their neighborhood or community. Participants had to work together effectively and use community resources. Recall of their experiences in respective group projects and the interactivity that evolved through them elicited remarks from participants that this way of learning garnered the most frustration, hard work, and meaning. Participants commented, "You had to collaborate with different groups…the people who you are working with. Otherwise you can't work with projects you do. It has to be a team work." Participants related how this nature of learning helped them to grow individually, "It helps you deal with people...I'm a good listener. I like to listen to different peoples' ideas and say, 'Let's pool them together and see what we have'."

Participants learned to reflect critically and consider alternatives to problems. They found they "learned to ask a lot more questions rather than accept what is." One participant discovered the difference between substantive council meetings held during the workday and meetings held at night to suffice the public. He described his experience:

> *Those are meetings that they just do the approval, the voting on…It's already been discussed during the day! I showed up [at a night meeting] and I thought, well, OK, we're going to discuss this bill…then the first thing is, here's the bill and are there any comments from the floor? OK, let's do a vote! [Laughter.] We're missing something!*

Another participant wrestles with the school bus shortage in her community: "realizing that things have to be done for us not to have 500 busses. Maybe we can get away with 200 if we do the schedule, but have we thought of the impact? It's a cost consideration, but is the cost worth it?"

## Implications

The major implication for this study is its value in strengthening democracy and citizenship. The underlying urgency is even in a mature democracy, citizens begin to take for granted its beliefs, institutions, and benefits. Specifically, it provides a place for adult educators to critically question the purposes and goals of leadership programs and for public administrators to study how policy programs are actually implemented. It has also investigated the impact of experiential learning or learning in the social context as it is connected to the learning format experienced in this specific neighborhood leadership institute. It draws a strong connection to the characteristics of adult education for social change or popular education as well as community development and thus contributes to the knowledge of these areas of adult education.

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